

# Prickly Prince of the Pinegroves

By Thomas Fegely



**IT'S DOUBTFUL IF ANYONE** would accuse the porcupine of being the handsomest critter in the woods . . . even another porky.

**T**HE EVENING SUN cast its long red rays between the tall oaks and pines somewhere in a forest in northern Pennsylvania, coloring the snow an unnatural pink. In and out of the shadows stalked a young bobcat, cold and hungry after several days of unsuccessful hunting. Suddenly, a movement atop a snow-laden stump caught his attention. The cat crouched and cautiously moved toward the waddling form. With a quick burst of speed and a final leap he landed atop the slow-moving prey. A chilling scream echoed through the dimly lit trees, breaking the stillness of the evening. The young bobcat rolled on its back and clawed at its face, attempting to rid itself of the painful needles which penetrated his tongue, cheeks and paws. Each desperate movement only drew the barbed quills farther into the cat's body. The lowly porcupine slowly climbed a nearby pine, glancing down occasionally at the crazed cat thrashing around in the snow.

Throughout eons of time, occurrences such as this have taken place in the north woods. Besides the bobcat, other victims include foxes, cougars, wolves, coyotes and great horned owls. Occasionally an innocent but curious deer has been lashed by the porky's spiny tail and consequently had to spend its last days wandering blindly until it was brought down by a predator or died of malnutrition. The only creature in the region that has ever consistently preyed upon the porcupine with success has been the fisher. Today, with the fisher being extinct in Penn's Woods, the porky's worst enemies are lice, ticks, fleas, forest fires, disease, automobiles and trigger-happy hunters.

The porcupine is a large rodent, sometimes reaching 40 inches in length, including the tail. An adult may weigh over 20 pounds. It has bright orange incisors, and body color is slaty to brownish-black. Its spines are white with black tips. Its face is blunt, rather snout-like, with dull

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black eyes. All in all, few people would call the porky handsome.

#### **One Who Rises in Anger**

The name porcupine, translated from its Latin derivatives "porcus" and "spina," means "spine swine." Its scientific name, *Erethizon dorsatum*, freely translated means "one who rises in anger."

If left alone, the quill pig is a peaceful creature and actually makes a good, if not cuddly pet. Contrary to legendary stories, the porcupine does not throw its quills. I have walked alongside of a porcupine for several hundred feet, completely ignored. On other occasions, when I tried the same thing, the porky did indeed "rise in anger," fanning out his quills and rapidly swishing his tail back and forth. Each seems to have a personality all its own.

To make up for its poor eyesight, the porcupine has an excellent sense of smell and a good sense of balance. It uses its nose constantly for finding suitable food, locating others of its kind or detecting danger. An inhabited area with a strong odor of dogs may be avoided, but woodland cabins or lumber camps often attract the porky in its search for salt. De-

spite the many salt licks placed for cattle or deer, the porky prefers to gnaw on items which have accumulated salt residues due to human perspiration. Saddles, ax handles, paint brushes, ladders, rubber hoses and leather goods are all a part of the porky's diet, if available. Many a cabin owner has returned in the spring only to find window sills, chopping boards and furniture chewed by the uninvited visitor.

#### **Only One Cub Each Year**

Porcupine young are born in the spring after a gestation period of about 215 days. Customarily, only a single offspring is produced each year. At birth the baby porcupine, sometimes called cub or porcupette, weighs 12 to 20 ounces—approximately twice as much as a black bear at birth. As soon as the youngster is dry, its quills become sharp and it can climb a tree when only two days old. Although the porky will take milk from its mother for more than a month after birth, it starts to feed itself in about a week. Mother and offspring will remain together throughout the summer but are seldom seen with each other. They will poke their way through the forest, occasionally grunting and sniffing the air to keep in touch with one another. By the second year the youngster is sexually mature and ready for mating.

Mating takes place sometime in fall or early spring. Prior to the mating act, courtship displays of rubbing noses, chattering teeth and walking on the hind feet may take place. Mating is done in the manner characteristic of all four-footed mammals.

#### **Diet of Bark to Berries**

Despite the single offspring and the long gestation period each year, porcupine populations hold their own and in some areas may reach great concentrations. When over-population occurs, lumber companies often eradicate porkies by shooting or salt-poisoning. In this day of scientific



**PORCUPINE SKULL** shows long incisors (one upper missing) and large molars which adapt him well for peeling and chewing bark.



timber management, damage done by the porcupine is often exaggerated, although it is a fact that the porky prefers to gnaw on trees that are desirable for lumber products.

The diet of the porcupine varies with the seasons. During any time of the year, however, this hunched mass of quills can be seen sitting high up in a pine, maple, birch or spruce, gnawing away at the bark or buds. Because of the abundance of beech trees in Pennsylvania, feeding on them is common and is usually done at the base of the tree. This may in part be due to the difficulty in climbing up the smooth bark.

Spring and summer foods may range from watermelon to clover to buds and twigs. Fall and winter feeding is confined largely to the soft inner cambium layer of trees, the bark, and evergreen needles. Since porkies do not hibernate, any species of tree may be fed upon during severe winters.

Although principally nocturnal and solitary, several porkies may shelter together in winter in a favorite den in a rock outcropping. During severe blizzards and on sub-zero days when icy winds whistle through the pines

and hemlocks, a porky might be seen feeding on evergreen needles or pruning the top of a dormant tree, creating a shaft-like appearance. These trimmings play a minor role in supplying food for deer and rabbits to feed upon in times of heavy snow. When deep snow is on the ground, a porky may stay in one tree for several weeks, stripping it of its branches and bark. During opening day of the 1964 deer season, I observed a lone porcupine crouched in a hemlock in a remote section of McKean County. I saw him again the next two Saturdays. Cut boughs littered the bare ground beneath the tree. Oddly enough, there was only light snow cover during the two-week period, over which the porky could have easily traveled.

#### **Secret Weapon—Barbed Quills**

As nature has endowed so many of her creatures, especially the vulnerable, with some form of escape or defense, the porcupine is probably one of the most fortunate. The skunk's pungent odor has little effect on the great horned owl. Rabbits, squirrels, beavers and other rodents have evolved means of quick escape, whether by running, climbing or swimming. The porcupine, also a rodent, not being adept at making speedy escapes, must rely on the 30,000 or so barbed quills which adorn his back, side and tail. At rest they lie flat and are sandwiched between the long, bristly guard hairs and the stiff, insulating underfur. Each quill tip possesses many microscopic barbs which slowly and painfully work their way into the victim's flesh with each muscular movement. In appearance, they are similar to the shaft of a bird's feather; they are actually modified hairs. Few dog owners in the North have avoided the unpleasant task of plucking quills from a moaning hound's face.

Quills deeply embedded cannot be pulled out by hand. Home remedies



for their removal include swabbing with vinegar or oil before their extraction and twirling the quill and twisting it out. Actually, a quick jerk with pliers works best. The quill shaft is not hollow and cannot be softened by solvent. Thorough cleaning of the wounds with disinfectant is also recommended.

The porcupine knows of the usefulness of its quills and takes full advantage of them. Typically, when approached, the porky will automatically assume its defense position, turning its back, erecting the quills and switching its tail back and forth. In my observations of a caged porky I found that blowing against its back was sufficient stimulus for him to assume a defense position. Reaction was immediate, whether the porky was wide awake or sound asleep.

During shedding time the cage bottom became littered with hundreds of quills, as well as guard hairs and fur. As each quill is lost, another begins to grow in its place.

Besides being used as a mace, the eight-inch spiked tail also acts as a spur when climbing trees and as a balance when sitting.

Although his front teeth can easily bite through a man's finger, the porcupine prefers to rely on keeping you in full view of his spiny backside. Porkies frequently take to water as a means of escape and are good swimmers, aided by their buoyant quills and guard hairs.

#### **Unpleasant Odor**

As a junior high school biology teacher, I am often blessed with playing nursemaid to squirrels, raccoons, snakes, skunks and a variety of other wild creatures. No other animal hastened the opening of classroom windows each morning as did the porcupine. His odor may be likened to that of a combination of ammonia and rotten wood. In the wild, this is of benefit to the porky in enabling it to detect others of its kind in the vicinity



*USDA Photo*

**PORCUPINE DAMAGE TO beech trees is often limited to the base, due perhaps to the difficulty in climbing the smooth bark of this species.**

and either avoid them or find a mate in the fall. But take it from me—it isn't pleasant anywhere indoors.

Depending on the porky's diet, his droppings may include bits of undigested wood. During the colder months of the year, more and larger wood particles will be intermixed with the undigested material, due to the increased amount of bark and twigs being eaten.

#### **Nature's Delicate Balance**

For years the porcupine has led a solitary and independent existence. The Indians used his quills for decorations. The lumbermen slaughtered him because of the damage inflicted upon prime trees and on personal articles around camp.

Let's not be too quick to judge the seemingly useless quill pig. His presence in our forests, parks and camping areas should serve to remind us of the niche filled by every form of life, no matter how insignificant it may seem. The unforeseen role played by this prickly prince of the pinegroves may not be understood until after he is gone.